

Higher education and social change

John Brennan

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Abstract An agenda for future higher education research is proposed which incorporates four interconnected elements: changing social contexts; their implications for higher education; mechanisms of interaction between higher education and society; higher education's impact on society. The role of comparative research in investigating these topics is discussed and a set of priorities for future research questions is proposed.

Keywords Higher education · Universities · Social change · Knowledge society · Diversity · Impact of higher education

In attempting to draw conclusions and to suggest agendas for future research on the relationship between higher education and wider social change, the final article in this special issue of Higher Education considers four interconnected elements which future research will need to take into account. These are changing social contexts; their implications for higher education; the mechanisms of interaction between higher education and society; and higher education's impact on society.

Changing social contexts

These importantly include processes of globalisation, of massification and its consequences, of forces for standardisation and harmonisation, of claims made for and on behalf of the

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J. Brennan (✉)

Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, The Open University, London, UK
e-mail: j.l.brennan@open.ac.uk

‘knowledge society’, of greater power for markets and consumers, of rapid developments in information technology, of changes in the contexts and processes of knowledge production, and of changes in the role of the state. Research questions include the ways in which such ‘mega trends’ are interpreted in different national and institutional settings, how they interact with different national and disciplinary traditions and with what implications for those who work and study in higher education, and for society more generally.

Concepts of ‘globalisation’ and ‘knowledge society’ have been used to describe recent changes in the nature of industrial societies with fundamental implications for the future shape and role of higher education systems and institutions. They have also been widely adopted in policy discourses and the media. Higher education policy makers and institutions have been eager to show the importance of higher education in a world where knowledge has become central to survival and success. Yet, both ‘globalisation’ and ‘knowledge society’ are contested concepts with ambiguous implications for the future of higher education. Related concepts are drawn from political ideologies such as neo-liberalism with their implications for the role of the state and the ‘marketisation’ of relationships with and between public sector organisations, including universities.

It is evident that international interconnectedness—globalisation—has increased and will be increasing in higher education in the future. National systems of higher education can no longer be regarded as closed systems. Competitive horizons opened by globalisation have influence on the policy goals of nation states. Simultaneously, however, it is important to acknowledge that national traditions continue their influence to greater or lesser extents, (Välimaa and Hoffman 2007).

Globalisation thus throws up many challenges for higher education researchers, not least to two central traditional categories used by researchers. These are the idea of a ‘national’ system of higher education and the idea of a university. Both of these categories need to be questioned in order to see how changes in society challenge our thinking as higher education researchers. Therefore, current changes in societies—and in higher education—challenge not only the functioning of higher education institutions but also the uses of traditional categories as intellectual devices to understand this functioning.

In many parts of the globe, supranational and national policies contribute towards a future where status hierarchies among universities and other types of higher education institutions are enforced or emerging (see the article by Teichler in this volume). Once status hierarchies are in place—like any form of social stratification—it becomes difficult to estimate who those hierarchies benefit most, or if they in fact shift attention away from more important debates and focal points in higher education (Bourdieu 1988; Välimaa and Hoffman 2007). This points to important future research questions on the causes and effects of homogeneity, diversity and the dynamics of differentiation in higher education.

Turning to notions of ‘knowledge society’, we can note that social theorists have been pointing for several decades to the central role of knowledge in the development of economies and societies. The same notion has been repeated by Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) when he analyses the difference between previous modes of development with the mode of development of the ‘digital world’.

As discussed in greater detail in the article by Valimaa and Hoffman in this volume, ‘knowledge society’ describes a new situation where knowledge, information and knowledge production have become defining features of relationships within and among societies, organisations, industrial production and human lives. Furthermore, the social theory of the knowledge society aims to explain the crucial role knowledge generation and dissemination plays in economics, culture and the politics of modern societies. All of this raises questions of whether knowledge societies call for more and different things from

their higher education systems and of whether they strengthen or weaken the position of universities as ‘knowledge institutions’.

A typical example of the emerging problems in the knowledge society is the debate on private and public goods. One issue concerns the ownership of innovation(s). In a number of countries, the problem has been addressed through legislation which regulates the intellectual property rights of academics and universities. However, the idea of intellectual property rights is challenged by the ethical basis of the open source development process, which envisions information and communication technologies as public goods, in which anyone is welcome to participate and all are invited to benefit. A second issue is related to student tuition fees. The question of ‘who benefits’ from higher education is often translated into the question of ‘who should pay’ for higher education. The acquisition of educational credentials can be regarded both as providing ‘positional advantage’ for those who possess them (and hence a ‘private good’) and as contributing to the creation of a more productive workforce and a successful national economy (and hence a ‘public good’).

The ‘publicness’ of higher education, including the important role of governmental responsibility, oversight and financing in many countries, and the legal status of the organisational providers and their staff is currently challenged in many ways. There are many indications of a major transformation of the relationship of universities with society that also affect the universities’ ‘publicness’. In elaborating future research on the public-private dynamics in higher education, the different meanings of the ‘private, the public and the good’ need to be addressed.

The above changes to higher education’s social and economic contexts are closely related to changes in political contexts. During the last few decades there have been shifts away from traditional state-centred governing arrangements. Traditional modes of government steering, based on notions of comprehensive planning, have been in retreat while new modes of governance, in the form of ‘steering at a distance’, new public management approaches, communicative planning and network approaches, have been gaining ground. Policies on the national and supranational levels are increasingly seeking to steer higher education and research systems in directions which are consistent with policies for emerging knowledge societies in a competitive global economy. At the same time, we witness the rise of an international competition among various models or narratives for ‘good governance’ in higher education and research. All of this points to the need for further conceptual and empirical investigations building on the stream of existing higher education policy studies.

In pointing up some of the major social, economic and political changes which characterise the modern world, it is important not to make a priori assumptions about responsiveness and change within higher education. While these changes in higher education’s global and local environments may be expected to almost certainly provoke changes in the political and other rhetorics which surround higher education, its traditional autonomies are not necessarily lost overnight and it remains an empirical question as to how far higher education does actually change as a result of the kinds of social changes described above. The changes in contexts do however suggest some important implications for higher education.

The implications for higher education

Implications for higher education arise from the expectations that higher education should be more visibly useful for economy and society; that higher education should be more

efficient and effective; that greater institutional diversity *and* multi-functionality are required; that more streamlined systems of regulation and decision-making are needed at the same time as the composition of actors and arenas of action are becoming more complex; and that established borderlines of arenas and functions are becoming blurred in the process of ‘internationalisation’ and ‘globalisation’, with implications for both autonomy and vulnerability.

Both available higher education research and the public discourse on higher education suggest that higher education perceives the current situation as ambivalent as far as the power of external forces and the room for manoeuvre is concerned. On the one hand, detailed public bureaucratic control of higher education has been reduced over the years. In addition, with the gradual erosion of the welfare state, higher education has been increasingly encouraged to seek funding from sources other than national governments. This multiple funding is seen as an opportunity for counter-balancing the expectations of single ‘masters’. On the other hand, higher education is increasingly exposed to strong external expectations to be more visibly useful for economy and society, to create stronger incentive-based internal regulation, to identify and meet the needs of perceived ‘market forces’, etc. This tension is often characterised in a harmonious way: higher education gains increasing ‘autonomy’ along with expectations to be ‘responsive’ and ‘accountable’. But, at the same time, enormous tensions between externally led and internally led programmatic decisions can result.

For future higher education research this indicates a need to analyse the operational dimensions of this interaction between external demands and internal goal-setting. What is happening in the processes of identifying needs and goals and of coping with them in the daily life of higher education institutions?

As a consequence of the abundance of diverse claims about the knowledge society, higher education is challenged to construct its own notion of ‘knowledge society’ as a basis for strategic action. It is a worthwhile endeavour for future higher education research to identify the typical notions of ‘knowledge society’ emerging within higher education and to compare them with the typical ‘knowledge society’ notions expressed by its stakeholders, the governments and society at large. It is important to explore the extent to which institutional profiles of higher education institutions are based on widely agreed concepts of knowledge society within the institutions themselves or the extent to which higher education institutions act on the basis of heterogeneous notions.

No matter what degree of governmental influence higher education has been exposed to in the past and what institutional autonomy and academic freedom have meant in practice, higher education institutions were tacitly expected to serve the knowledge system and the public good from a macro perspective. They had to strike a balance between external influence and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, between academic quality and societal relevance, between elitist, meritocratic and socially cohesive norms, etc.

A substantial paradigmatic shift has happened in the last two decades. Higher education institutions are increasingly encouraged to opt for institutional strategies led by institutional rationales. What then are the thematic priorities for teaching and research in an institution under its specific context and resources? What would be the admission and selection criteria to form a student body most congenial to the specific aims of the institution? What can be done to assure the best professional placement of the institution’s graduates?

Higher education research has to identify the consequences of different institutional responses and actions for the higher education system as a whole. What degree of diversity emerges vertically, i.e. the level of quality and reputation, and horizontally, i.e. the

substantive profiles of teaching, learning and research? Does the increasing power of meso perspectives and the increasing willingness of higher education institutions to identify a specific role for themselves in competition with other institutions overall strike a balance for an acceptable macro system? To what extent do we observe visible ‘distortions’?

Higher education is expected from outside, and increasingly intends from inside, to be a strategic actor. This implies a need:

- to set clear goals for actions, even symbolically in the form of “mission” and “vision” statements;
- to clarify the ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ of any major action;
- to base decisions on the analyses of potentials, opportunities and constraints;
- to consider the ‘effectiveness’ and ‘efficiency’—key words of strategic reflection—of activities;
- to establish forceful means of pursuing the implementation of strategies, e.g. through efforts to create a widespread consensus among actors, to stimulate strategic activities with the help of rewards and sanctions etc;
- to evaluate and to be regularly evaluated externally with respect to the processes and outcomes of activities; and
- to consider the consequences of the results of such evaluations for future strategy and action.

Higher education increasingly aims to analyse these trends towards ‘strategic universities’, for example with regard to the strategic concepts as such, the role they play between lofty declarations and powerful guidelines for daily actions. Analyses of the strategic paradigm of higher education have to ask how changes are made to the actual norms and actions in the daily life of the higher education institutions. For example, does higher education limit its actions to norms and activities which fit best into the logic of higher education strategies, while neglecting those tasks for which the success cannot be easily assessed in terms of effectiveness and efficiency?

Mechanisms of interaction between society and higher education

Interactions between higher education and the rest of society reflect the increasing social embeddedness of higher education institutions within a multitude of communities that make their own particular demands. New interconnections and interdependencies relate to both external and internal functions of higher education. These raise questions about the drivers of and instruments for changing interactions between higher education and society, about the kinds and amounts of differentiation that are required and achievable, and about the kinds and the ownership of the criteria for judging performance.

The diversity of communities—stakeholders or constituencies—and the diverse demands these clients place on higher education institutions have resulted in new relationships within and between higher education institutions and in new relationships between them and the external communities they serve. These relationships have local, regional, national and international ingredients. The ability to devise efficient means of accommodating these demands is held to be a prime criterion for higher education institutions to be considered as innovative and responsive.

The consequences for higher education institutions of a multiplicity of stakeholders have been explored indirectly as sub-components of inquiries, for example, into the diversification of funding sources, as a concomitant to the overhaul of higher education

management, or as an aspect of relations between higher education institutions and their region. Nevertheless, systematic scholarly examination in this field is rare while there is an increase in the weight of societal interests in higher education.

The reaching out to communities and the taking on of civic responsibilities by universities and their units conform to a trend to design higher education and science policies in ways that make teaching and research more publicly accountable and relevant to society. One of the major assumptions behind the notion of a revised social contract for higher education is that changes in the modes of co-ordination imply changes in the balance of power between different constituencies and interests acting around and within higher education.

In order to identify factors that are of relevance for analysing institutional responses and changing interfaces between internal and external communities, we have to look both at structures and actors. As regards the actors, we are interested in the various stakeholders in the environments of organisations, the roles of governmental actors, other higher education organisations, private businesses, labour unions, local and regional politicians and others in the development and implementation of new interfaces and intra-organisational change strategies. Concerning the internal organisational actors, their perceptions of the organisational environment and the main environmental actors are at stake as well as their role for the development, implementation and effects of change strategies. In a higher education system that produces public and private goods and is characterised by volatility and unpredictability in terms of demands, it is worth exploring how the higher education institutions and their internal constituencies respond to ‘societal demand’.

Further, quasi-market elements are becoming increasingly popular in higher education policymaking. As Texeira et al. (2004) have shown, experimentation with market mechanisms take three main forms: the promotion of competition, privatisation and the promotion of economic autonomy of higher education institutions. Dill et al. (2004, p. 345) point to the contribution of market mechanisms in terms of cost per graduate and scientific productivity, the transparency in the system and the operation of universities, their growing flexibility, resilience and responsiveness. At the same time, serious concerns about the costs of an increasingly fierce and globalising ‘academic arms race’ are raised. Competition for academic reputation may become an end in itself (Calhoun 2006). Public money would increasingly be used to reproduce or enhance the reputation of institutions and scholars as a market signal rather than as a means of linking up with society and serving the private and the public good.

Whereas in the past establishments of higher education could rely on set and formal criteria to demonstrate their effectiveness and to assert legitimacy vis-à-vis their main constituent—i.e. government—they now have to accommodate a more complex, fluid and varied environment. Changes in the balance of demand and power between higher education’s different constituencies impact upon the nature of higher education’s social and economic functions. The question then is whether a set of institutional selections and interfaces can deliver the required outcomes of efficiency and legitimacy in the public interest. This leads not only to questions of performance but also to questions of democratic legitimacy which need to be addressed in the light of a changing social contract for higher education.

Commitment to the public is about more than just maintaining contacts with ‘clients’. It means the organisation and its communities seeking and using ways of engaging in a dialogue with various stakeholders in order to learn about how its services are valued and to encourage it to perform them better. Horizontal accountability includes mechanisms to ensure transparency about choices made and to assure the involvement of civil society. The

word ‘horizontal’ stresses the fact that higher education institutions do not just communicate with and render proof to a principal that is placed higher up in the hierarchy, but to groups, bodies, agents that have an interest in the higher education institution. A careful study of the public view on universities’ performance and emerging new forms of horizontal governance and accountability would, therefore, be both timely and warranted.

This leads us to the issue of the institutions and mechanisms responsible for the overall co-ordination and effective functioning of the higher education system. Once universities have become more autonomous and entrepreneurial actors, it is difficult to assume that their corporate activities can necessarily constitute the public interest. Organisational self-interest does not necessarily contribute to systemic performance and the public good.

Higher education’s impact on society

Much research and debate concerns the responsiveness of higher education to the increasing expectations of society and the expanding range of ways in which these expectations are transmitted and enforced. But what of the other side of the relationship? Below we consider higher education’s impact on society from three perspectives. First, there is higher education’s role in terms of constructing and supporting the ‘knowledge society’. Second, there is a role in constructing the ‘just and stable’ society. Third, there is a role in constructing the ‘critical society’. There are tensions between these different areas of ‘impact’ and there are increasingly problematic boundary definitions of the social spaces that are ‘impacted upon’—local, national, regional, global. And at some times and some places, ‘obstruction’ rather than ‘construction’ may be more in evidence.

Issues of ‘impact’ are ultimately separable from issues of ‘expectations’. We can find many examples in the literature of the ways in which societal expectations are ‘transformed’ into something quite different by the mediating efforts of social actors inside and outside higher education (e.g. Kogan et al. 2000). In considering higher education’s impact on society, therefore, it is important to look beyond the intentions, both honourable and otherwise, of those with power to shape systems, institutions and processes towards the actions and outcomes—for both individuals and society—of the various forms of engagement with those systems, institutions and processes by an increasingly wide spectrum of social actors.

As we have noted previously, many claims are made about the pivotal role of higher education in the creation and transfer of the knowledge central to the construction of the ‘knowledge society’ and these have been discussed at some length in earlier sections of this paper. Some influential contributions have emphasised the increasingly external mediations of knowledge production (e.g. Gibbons et al. 1994; Nowotny et al. 2001; Magalhaes 2001) with concepts such as ‘mode 2’ knowledge, legal conceptions of ‘intellectual property’ and ‘academic capitalism’ replacing, or at least challenging, concepts such as ‘autonomy’, ‘academic freedom’ and ‘academic community’. These shifts may represent a greater emphasis upon a role for higher education as an agent in the transmission of social change sponsored by others rather than as itself an originator of change. They also represent a shift in emphasis from ‘discipline’ to ‘application’. Issues arise concerning the organisation, funding, location and management of research.

Such issues connect to questions of power and decision-making, of relationships within and beyond the academic community and, above all, of the uses to which knowledge is put. They raise questions about who in society has access to the knowledge created, and to some extent ‘stored’, within higher education, and about whose interests are served. They

also raise issues for the boundaries and relationships between ‘scientific’ and ‘everyday’ knowledge and for the roles and training of academics. As far as impact is concerned, questions arise concerning the respective roles and qualities of research conducted under quite different conditions in different institutional settings. As we have already noted, the pressures towards increasingly ‘internalist’ considerations among the university-based research community may have the unintended consequence of reducing the relevance and social impact of much research.

Much of the debate on these topics has verged on the rhetorical. Future research might track the impact of different forms of knowledge produced in different forms of organisational setting. Questions of ‘impact on whom and on what’ also arise.

A second element of the ‘knowledge society’ emphasis is the centrality of human capital to its functioning together with the perceived importance of higher education to its production. While much evidence attests to the continuing ‘employability’ of higher education’s graduates (Schomburg and Teichler 2006)—notwithstanding the massive increase in their numbers in recent decades—there is little consensus about the basis of this employability, in particular whether it is a function of the relevance of the knowledge and skills transmitted by higher education or of the use made by employers of educational credentials as a selection device, identifying individual ‘potential’ and the existence of social and cultural capital. There is some evidence that the balance between the two hypotheses differs between different European countries. Within the human capital approaches, increased emphasis can be found on higher education’s contribution to workforce development through lifelong learning and continuing professional development as well as the initial ‘formation’ of the graduate workforce. Questions of ‘employer engagement’ are raised within policy discourses in some countries and the nature of the division of labour between higher education and employers in the formation—both initial and continuing—of skilled and professional labour both differs between individual countries and may be changing.

Turning to the construction of the ‘just society’, credentials acquired through higher education are increasingly central to the determination of life chances in most developed countries. Therefore, the degree of social equity in the acquisition of these credentials becomes an important indicator of social justice. The empirical evidence from most of Europe, however, is that increased enrolments in higher education have done little to achieve more equitable social access to them. In fact, some evidence points to an opposite conclusion—expansion of numbers of graduates having been achieved mainly through increases in middle-class enrolments, hence increasing the disadvantages faced by people without educational credentials. Such evidence lends support to the ‘reproduction theorists’ (Bourdieu 1996; Brown and Scase 1994) who see higher education as providing both the mechanism and the legitimisation for class reproduction. On this view, upward social mobility was created by changes in the occupational structure (more ‘room at the top’). Without such changes, higher education is predominantly a process of ‘status confirmation’ for members of the elite and socially advantaged groups more generally. Status (and wealth and power) is legitimised through an ideology of meritocracy. The appearance (at least) of equal opportunities to acquire socially valued credentials is vital to that legitimacy in order that those lacking status etc. may be persuaded that ‘it is their own fault’.

Somewhat different perspectives arise if more emphasis is given to diversity within society and to differentiation within higher education. *Even if* the elite reproduction function is maintained, this is not the only function of ‘mass’ systems of higher education. Within the ‘less noble’ reaches of most higher education systems, important ‘re-allocation’ functions may be taking place as routes of upward mobility provide access, if not to elites,

to careers and lifestyles unknown to previous generations. The interesting research question then becomes how higher education manages simultaneously to contribute to elite reproduction and to social mobility, and hence to the creation of both efficient and fair societies.

Some other perspectives argue that higher education's contribution to social justice is not just through the extension of participation. Higher education may impact both on cultural change and citizenship in ways that affect all in society, whether or not they have ever attended a higher education institution (Calhoun 2006). The diffusion of knowledge and the engagement of the academic community may impact on society independently of participation rates. The social and cultural impact of universities on their various communities has generally been under-researched.

In some countries, a 'third mission' of higher education—to do with service and citizenship—is a strong feature of academic and institutional cultures. However, the content and function of this aspect of mission are not impervious to the effects of social change. There are certainly questions to be posed about 'who is being served', with answers to be found along a spectrum from the 'public good' at one end to 'academic capitalism' at the other.

The above questions may take us beyond issues of the 'just' society to issues connected with the 'stable' society. Questions of social cohesion and integration are being asked in new and forceful ways at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Higher education's contribution to achieving them may be considered at local, regional, national and—through the increasing international mobility of both academic staff and students—at global levels.

The many who have stressed the importance of the autonomy of higher education would emphasise our third broad area of 'impact': higher education's role in the construction of a 'critical society', in providing a 'critical space' within which new and potentially controversial views can be elaborated. The idea of the academic role as 'taking truth to power' is a linked notion and something of the opposite to calls for greater responsiveness and relevance. It is a concept which stresses the importance of 'autonomy' rather than 'responsiveness' in the functions of the academy. However, empirically, there may be more examples to be found of higher education bolstering existing power relations than of it critiquing or subverting them (Brennan et al. 2005).

Again, there are connections with the other two 'constructions'. The 'critical society' may not be unrelated to the 'critical graduate'. There are issues of 'elite' and 'mass' in relation to the locus of power and of how far 'power' welcomes or resists a visit from 'truth'. Is 'criticality' required of all or only of those in elite parts of higher education? (The rest can concentrate on honing their work-related competences!) But claims to 'truth' are themselves open to question within post-modern and other conceptions of science and society.

Related conceptions take us to the 'risk society' (Beck 1992; Giddens 1997) and towards notions of 'negotiated' and 'cycles' of knowledge construction (Beck 1992; Nowotny et al. 2001). The question of who has access to different forms of knowledge connects to issues of justice, stability and efficiency within the knowledge society.

A further issue concerns our understanding or definition of the 'society' that higher education may be impacting upon. On the one hand, the nation state may be being replaced by global notions of society, or categories such as 'developed nations', or regional categories such as 'Europe' and, on the other hand, it may be replaced by local/regional settings and sub-groups within them. The international mobility of students, for example, gives rise to large sub-populations of international students within some universities. The potential social impact of the university through such sub-groups is likely to be different

from its more localised impacts, and the nature of those localised impacts may themselves be changed as a result of the international element of the university's mission. Within notions of differentiated and fragmented societies, the provision of an integrative force may become an important function for many universities.

A characteristic of most of these areas of social impact is the paucity of research evidence to support them. There are considerable methodological difficulties in addressing them but comparative approaches may possess considerable power. The 'laboratory' notion of Europe may be useful in this respect as distinctive sub-regional and national differences exist alongside some broadly common features and trends. Additional areas of methodological challenge concern the timescales of impact and the difficulties of measurement—e.g. what impacts on what—and the need to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches. Whatever methods are adopted, there may be occasions when higher education's contributions to social change are best described as 'obstruction' rather than 'construction'!

Conclusions and research agenda

An important aspect of the HELF project was the attempt to locate higher education research more firmly in its social science context. The project aimed

“to examine the research literature in terms of its underlying conceptual approaches and empirical findings across a number of selected sub-themes in order to derive a future research agenda that will address scientific questions of long-term strategic concern to the future of higher education”.

In placing its emphasis on developing a *scientific* agenda for future research in this field, HELF was not resistant to the pressures towards relevance and responsiveness which are an increasing feature of research in most academic fields. But it can also be argued that the needs of policymakers and practitioners will be better met if there is sometimes some element of 'distance' between their immediate concerns and interests and the questions pursued by research. The important role of research in responding to policy questions is certainly not being denied but, alongside it, there is another at least as important role in helping to set future policy questions. Scientific research agendas should not just reflect policy agendas, they should help determine them.

Following on from the HELF project, the European Science Foundation agreed to support a new programme of international research on 'Higher Education and Social Change' (EuroHESC). The objectives set for that research programme derive directly from HELF. They are:

- (i) to develop and implement a programme of comparative research into the relationship between higher education and society;
- (ii) to develop theories and hypotheses about this relationship and the factors which influence it;
- (iii) to address methodological issues of comparative research in this field, including data comparability, combining quantitative and qualitative research, and different levels of analysis;
- (iv) to explore ways of utilising other social science datasets—for example, the European Social Survey and Eurostudent—in order to set higher education research more firmly within the different social and cultural settings in which it occurs;

- (v) to draw out relationships with other fields of social science research;
- (vi) to draw out implications for national and international higher education policy makers;
- (vii) to make a significant contribution to the development of research capacity in the field of higher education research and to an improved integration between the field and related scientific fields.

The achievement of such objectives will require not only funding but the arousal of greater scientific interest in higher education as a legitimate and rewarding field for future research from among social scientists beyond the specialist ‘tribe’ of higher education researchers.

A conclusion of the HELF project that hopefully will influence future research is that many of the pressing research questions in this field would benefit from—and in some cases probably require—a comparative approach. Such an approach can provide research with a set of both historic and contemporary differences that facilitates almost ‘laboratory conditions’ for scientific inquiry into both systems and institutions. Despite the forces of globalisation, there remain significant differences between countries and groups of countries in the traditional conceptions of higher education and its relationships with other social institutions. There are differences in contemporary circumstances in terms of higher education’s organisational forms, governance and mission. And there are differences in the features of contemporary political, economic, social and cultural contexts in which higher education institutions and personnel must work. Yet these differences are bounded by sufficient similarities to make comparative research particularly powerful, i.e. in setting limits to the range of the ‘unknowns’ that may affect data.

Further conclusions were prompted by debate at the HELF project’s final conference in London at the end of October 2007. These included reminders of the importance of historical perspectives to many of the issues requiring investigation, the need to acknowledge the ‘agency’ of the many groups of actors present in the field and, relatedly, the need to be less ‘fatalistic’ about the emergence and effects of policy. The need to be alert to the unintended consequences of policies, coupled with the challenges of identifying the causal relationships involved in producing various kinds of impacts, was a further conclusion from the conference. There was also a call for more ‘translational research’, i.e. research which was fed into university staff development programmes, which would contribute to the emergence of more ‘reflective practitioners’ within the academic profession, and which, in the words of one delegate, could lead to the ‘re-institutionalisation of the university’ itself.

The reviews and debates that have occurred as part of the HELF project have posed many questions for future research. In terms of priorities, however, the following set were identified and form part of the agenda for the new EuroHESC programme.

First, there is an overarching question as follows:

- (i) What are the relationships and interconnections between contemporary social and economic changes and transformations and the changes and transformations occurring within higher education institutions and to the roles of academics?

This leads on to a set of interconnected questions.

- (ii) How are the changes in the balance of power between higher education’s different constituencies and interests impacting upon the nature of higher education’s social functions and the manner in which these are discharged?

- (iii) Are a growing multi-functionality of higher education and a blurring of its boundaries with other social institutions necessary in order for higher education to have an importance within a 'knowledge society'?
- (iv) How do changes in the organisation of higher education institutions relate to changes in intellectual programmes, agendas and advances?
- (v) Do different forms of differentiation and inter-institutional diversity result in different relationships between higher education and the larger social and economic worlds of which it is a part?
- (vi) To what extent and in what ways do national, regional and local contexts continue to play a decisive role in determining the characteristics of modern higher education systems? What is the role played by various public authorities? How much variation is there in the extent to which universities are internationally connected or integrated and with what consequences?
- (vii) How might new forms of comparative research, involving both quantitative and qualitative approaches, be employed in order to achieve a better understanding of the interactions between higher education and society and the *different* forms these interactions take in different parts of Europe and more widely?

Of course, other questions can and will be posed. The answers to some of them may prove to be uncomfortable for many of the people currently working and studying within higher education. That may raise additional organisational questions about the conditions and contexts in which higher education research is best carried out and the kinds of training and experience that its practitioners need to have.

To repeat, the purpose of researching higher education is not just to make higher education 'better'—although hopefully it will also do that—but to enhance our understanding of contemporary societies and the futures that are available to them. The parts that learning, knowledge and science in all their forms and in all their organisational settings have to play in achieving such understandings and in shaping such futures deserve, we believe, to have a central place in social science endeavours.

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